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Swords and Cimeters in the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: Roper examines the use of the terms sword and cimeter in a Mesoamerican setting as well as in the Book of Mormon text. The macuahuitl was a fearsome weapon consisting of a long, flat piece of hardwood with grooves along the side into which sharp fragments of flint or obsidian were set and glued. Our knowledge of this weapon comes more from written accounts than actual artifacts because few specimens have survived. The Book of Mormon sword of Laban was used as a model for making swords, but they were not necessarily made of the same material. The discussion in Alma 24:12 having to do with stained swords would make particular sense with wooden swords. Cimeters, or scimitars, differ from swords in having curved blades. Several kinds of swords and cimeters that were in use in ancient Mesoamerica are plausible candidates for Book of Mormon weapons.

Swords & "Cimeters" in the Book of Mormon

by Matthew Roper

Illustrations by Robyn Miley

The abundant accounts of warfare in the Book of Mormon are punctuated by statements about weaponry. For example, Alma 43:17–18 begins the narration of the long war between the Lamanites and the Nephites. The latter were led by Moroni:

This relief is carved at the entrance to Loltún Cave, northern Yucatan. In his right hand the warrior brandishes a pointed macuahuitl; in his left he grasps a double-curved weapon, perhaps a scimitar. In Izapan (late Preclassic) style, the carving has been tentatively dated, on the basis of the glyphs at the top, at 157 B.C.

He was only twenty and five years old when he was appointed chief captain over the armies of the Nephites. And it came to pass that he met the Lamanites in the borders of Jershon, and his people were armed with swords and with cimeters, and all manner of weapons of war.

Their first serious battle soon afterward featured these two deadly implements, as we are told in Alma 43:37:

The work of death commenced on both sides, but it was more dreadful on the part of the Lamanites, for their nakedness was exposed to the heavy blows of the Nephites with their swords and their cimeters, which brought death almost at every stroke.

Most readers of the Book of Mormon have some idea of what a sword may have looked like, but what were "cimeters?" Even a dictionary will not help with this term. Yet, as we shall see, even our preconceptions about "swords" need clarifying. The English expression *sword* in the King James Version of the Bible ought to be enough to caution us about easy assumptions, since it is used to translate Hebrew terms as varied as *baraq*, "lightning" (a metaphor); *šelaḥ*, "javelin" or "dart"; *pəṭiḥah*, "dagger"; *reṣaḥ*, "murder" (metaphoric); and *ḥereḇ*, "short sword" or "knife."[1]

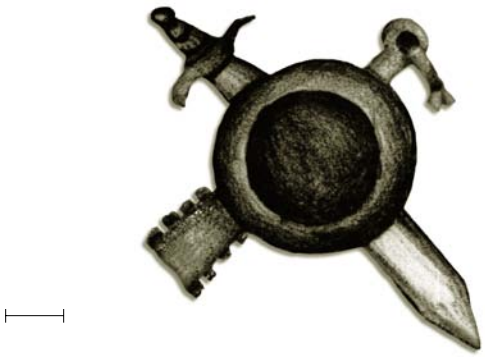
This article looks at these two categories of weapons—swords and cimeters—from two perspectives. On swords, we will look first to Mesoamerica, the area of the New World where most researchers believe the Nephites lived, to assess what swordlike implements the people there used. Then we will see what light this Mesoamerican data sheds on the picture of swords and cimeters we construct from the Book of Mormon text. The approach to cimeters will reverse the order—the Book of Mormon text will be considered first, then the Mesoamerican parallels. We shall find that there were indeed an interesting variety of Mesoamerican weapons that are consistent with Book of Mormon use of the terms *sword* and *cimeter*.

Ancient Mesoamerican Swords

Macuahuitl Swords

When the Spanish conquistadors faced Mesoamerican armies in the early sixteenth century, without hesitation they called the most fearsome type of native weapon *espada*, "sword." The Aztec name was *macuahuitl* (pronounced "mah-kwah-weetl") or *macana*. When the indomitable Bernal Díaz, one of Cortez's companions in his conquest of central Mexico, saw the macuahuitl at work in the hands of the enemy, he reported that "their swords, which were as long as broadswords, were made of flint which cut worse [i.e., more sharply] than a knife, and the blades were so set that one could neither break them nor pull them out."[2]

Note: the small measurement rules near each illustration represent a length of six inches proportional to the scale of the illustration.



The Spaniards considered the Aztec macuahuitl equivalent to their sword as shown by these "crossed arms" representing their alliance with native allies.

A macuahuitl consisted of a long, flat piece of hardwood with grooves along the side into which were set and glued sharp fragments of flint or obsidian (volcanic glass). Several inches of the wood piece were usually left as a handgrip at the bottom, the rest of the instrument having a continuous sharp serrated edge; others had spaces between the blades that resulted in a serrated edge. While most of these weapons were blunt at the top, some were tipped with a sharp stone.

Some writers have spoken of this weapon as a war club, but the term *club* is inappropriate. The macuahuitl was designed primarily as a slashing, rather than a crushing, weapon. In fact Spanish eyewitnesses not only described it as a sword but frequently distinguished it from clubs.[3]

The Spaniards reported that many warriors possessed the macuahuitl. It was the combat weapon of preference. It was also easily and quite cheaply constructed. Furthermore, repairs could be made in the field if a man had a little bag of replacement flints with him. Socially prominent men used richly decorated weapons. According to Bernal Díaz,

Montezuma had two houses stocked with every sort of weapon; many of them were richly adorned with gold

I would like to express thanks to John L. Sorenson and William J. Hamblin for helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this article and for providing several key references and helpful encouragement.

The macuahuitl took a variety of forms, some pointed, some not.

> and precious stones. There were shields large and small, and a sort of broadsword [the macuahuitl], and two-handed swords set with flint blades that cut much better than our swords.[4]

Another historian, Solis, reported:

> In the highest part [of Montezuma's armory] they placed the arms belonging to the king, which were hung round the wall in excellent order: On one side the bows, arrows, and quivers, with various embossed work of gold and precious stones; On another, two-handed swords, and others of extraordinary wood, with flint edges, and most curious and costly handles. . . . The Spaniards greatly wondered to behold such a prodigious quantity of arms.[5]

Study of the weapons of Mesoamerica has been limited by the fact that few specimens have survived. One reason is that the arms were made of perishable materials for the most part—wood, bamboo, leather, cloth—substances that decay easily.[6] Actually three—but only three—examples of the macuahuitl in its two-handed form have been recovered by archaeologists in recent years. One had been buried with a man in a tomb at Huitzo, Oaxaca, Mexico. A necklace with gold, jade, and purple amethyst beads had adorned the deceased, and beneath his skull were obsidian blades in a position that suggested they had been part of a pre-Hispanic sword.[7] Remnants of two other weapons were found near Quirigua, Guatemala.[8]

Representations of ancient weapons do not abound in Mesoamerican art either. Ross Hassig, an expert on Aztec warfare, observes, for instance, that "despite the pivotal importance of the macuahuitl (broadsword) in Aztec warfare, as amply attested in Spanish accounts, it is not depicted in Pre-Columbian art even in scenes that show warriors and capture."[9] For our knowledge we are primarily dependent on the recorded testimony of those who saw the weapons in use during the short conquest period, for they were soon displaced by European arms. This lack of physical evidence for ancient Mesoamerican artifacts as abundant as these swords warns us that absence of evidence from archaeology and art does not mean that a particular artifact—in this case a weapon—was unknown in pre-Columbian times.

The eyewitness accounts by the Spaniards of course date to less than 500 years ago. How much farther back in time was the macuahuitl in use? There is evidence from scenes engraved on stone monuments indicating that the weapon had had a long history. At the site of La Nueva on the Pacific coast of Guatemala, which dates to the period A.D. 450 to 900, a warrior carved in the Cotzumalhuapa style is shown holding an object which looks very much like one of these swords.[10] At ruined Uaxactun—a Maya city in

A warrior shown on a monument at La Nueva on the Pacific coast of Guatemala (A.D. 450-900) grasps this long, tapering weapon which is apparently a macuahuitl of variant form.

lowland Guatemala—Stela 5, which dates around A.D. 378 as presently interpreted, portrays a standing warrior carrying a macuahuitl "set with triangular flints" in his right hand.[11] A still earlier relief is carved beside the mouth of a cave at Loltún on the Yucatan peninsula. In his left hand a warrior holds a strange curved object, but in his right he wields a weapon with triangular stone blades set apart

from each other, as well as having a point at the tip. The latter implement bears a strong resemblance to the Aztec macuahuitl. The Loltún figure is rendered in a style called Izapan by art historians, that is, it dates a little earlier than the time of Christ.[12]

Other examples are even older, dating to Olmec times, the period of the Jaredites of the Book of Mormon. Archaeologist Philip Drucker describes a carved monument at La Venta from before 500 B.C. showing "an obsidian-edged sword,"[13] while Ann Cyphers Guillen recently discovered a stone carving at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo that dates before 900 B.C., "possibly showing a club-like weapon with attached obsidian blades."[14] Clearly this type of sword had such a long history of use in Mesoamerica that it must be considered a fundamental weapon.

Swords in the Book of Mormon in the Light of Mesoamerica

In 1 Nephi we learn that Laban, a powerful official in Jerusalem around 600 B.C., possessed a sword with a blade "of the most precious steel" (1 Nephi 4:9).[21] The blade also had a sheath. Nothing is said of the length of the blade, although it proved long enough to cut off a man's head.

Some years after he arrived in the New World, $Nephi_1$ recorded:

> And I, Nephi, did take the sword of Laban, *and after the manner of it did make many swords*, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us (2 Nephi 5:14).

AND I, NEPHI, DID TAKE THE SWORD OF LABAN, AND AFTER THE MANNER
BY ANY MEANS THE PEOPLE WHO WERE NOW CALLED LAMANITES SHOULD

Wood-Bladed Swords

Ronald Spores notes that weapons used among the Zapotec people of southern Mexico included "long and short wooden swords" *in addition to* "clubs" and "macanas" or obsidian-edged swords.[15] Swords with only a wooden blade (probably of sharpened hardwood) are mentioned in early Spanish accounts,[16] and several codices or native manuscripts (the Codex Mendoza, Codex Mexicanus, and Codex Porfirio Díaz) portray such weapons—simple wooden blades, in distinction to the obsidian-lined macuahuitls. Some of these wood blades are clearly pointed.[17] Codices like these suggested to ethnohistorian Brian Hayden "that obsidian-edged *macanas* were used predominantly by the elite knights, and the plain wood blades were used by peasant fighters."[18]

Short Swords or Fighting Knives

Some Spanish accounts also suggest that at least some Mesoamerican warriors may have used long knives which they carried into battle. These might qualify as a kind of short sword. One historian related that the Uaymil Maya warriors had "long daggers like short swords."[19] Archaeologist Samuel K. Lothrop noted from the early documents that the Maya and the Toltecs possessed "fighting knives" in addition to clubs and the macuahuitl.[20]

Does this statement mean that $Nephi_1$ made "many swords" of steel closely imitating the model one he had brought from Jerusalem?

William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill provide a key discussion of these issues that makes several important observations.[22] In the first place, we can wonder about the meaning of the term *steel.* The KJV Old Testament uses the English word *steel* in several places while the Hebrew clearly reads "bronze" or perhaps copper, "hardened and tempered in the manner of steel."[23] Joseph Smith's translation of this term may have followed the usage of the English Bible, as was the case at other points in his translation. Actually, a kind of steel was known in the kingdom of Judah by 600 B.C. but was uncommon and probably imported rather than having been produced by local metallurgists whose practices $Nephi_1$ might have observed. This special status of steel may be why particular mention was made that the sword of Laban was of that material. It is very unlikely that $Nephi_1$, who was a youth of only around 16 when he left Jerusalem, could have known the technology to produce new steel blades even though he might on occasion have observed the activities associated with copper and iron production in the kingdom of Judah in his day. And we must keep in mind that whatever knowledge of metalworking he might personally have gained would perhaps not have endured for long through succeeding generations of Nephites. The latest mention of making copper, iron, and "steel" is in Jarom 1:8, a couple

of centuries after Nephi$_1$'s death; if he did know the process, it could well have died out in succeeding years. There is no evidence from Mesoamerican archaeology or traditions to indicate the use of any metal in the manufacture of swords, other than as occasional decoration, although we may not have the final word on that matter.[24]

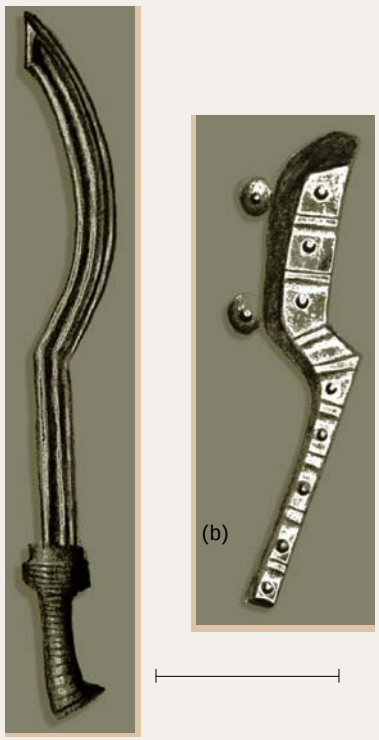
But we do not need to interpret Nephi's statement "after the manner of" as meaning that the swords he produced were of the same material as Laban's sword, only that their general pattern was similar—a straight double-edged slashing implement, in contrast to a cimeter. The same phraseology is used by Nephi$_1$ in regard to building their temple in the new land. He did so "after the manner" (that is, according to the pattern) of the temple of Solomon, but it was not built of all the same materials (see 2 Nephi 5:1). When Nephi$_1$ produced enough swords to arm his whole people, he could well have used some other metal, including perhaps obsidian, flint, or even fire-hardened wood, for the cutting portion.

OF IT DID MAKE MANY SWORDS, LEST COME UPON US AND DESTROY US.

Could a Macuahuitl Be "Stained"?

The Lamanite king named Anti-Nephi-Lehi admonished his fellow converts, "Since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren" (Alma 24:12). Many types of obsidian have a fine luster so the edges of a macuahuitl might well be described as bright.[25] For example, Friar Juan de Torquemada in the sixteenth century described obsidian as "a stone which might be called precious, more beautiful and brilliant than alabaster or jasper."[26] But what might "stain our swords" have meant if a Lamanite or Nephite sword was in the form of a macuahuitl? Hamblin has noted that blood would deeply stain the wood in a weapon like the Aztec sword. The king's metaphor for redemption that involved stained weapons and their cleansing might actually be more powerful if it referred to blood-soaked wood than to a metal or even an obsidian blade, which could easily be wiped clean.

Did native American swords have sheaths? Laban's sword is the only weapon mentioned in the Book of Mormon that is said to have been carried in a sheath. There are later references to men "drawing" their swords, but that expression need not imply a sheath. Weapons could be "drawn" from a bag or basket in which they were stored



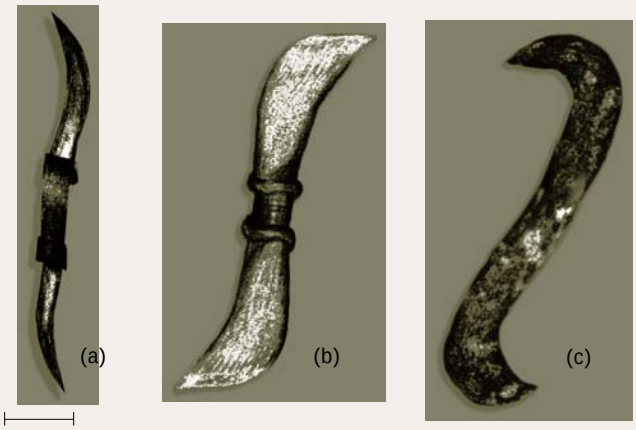
Near Eastern Weapon Parallels

Certain weapons in use in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica resemble those that were used in the ancient Near East. This Canaanite sickle sword (a) is so much like a scimitar-like weapon shown in the Mexican Codex Borgia (b) as to be very interesting.

The odd curved weapon pictured in the grasp of the sculptured warrior figure at Loltún Cave, Yucatan (see p. 34), has two blades projecting in opposite directions from a central handle. Whether the blades were of chipped obsidian or hardened wood, this device would have been fearsome to face in hand-to-hand combat. What seems to be another version of the same concept is pictured in the early art of highland Guatemala.

Hamblin noted that this weapon has a close parallel in ancient Syria and India. There it has been called a curved double-dagger or *haladie*. Each of its blades was approximately 8½ inches long and the two were connected by a small handgrip, probably of wood.[1] The fact that the Nephites, Lamanites, and Mulekites of the Book of Mormon record had their origins in ancient Israel, adjacent to Syria, is interesting, to say the least. To all appearances the haladie, the Loltún Cave weapon, and the Kaminaljuyu weapon were constructed in response to one shared idea, and both must have functioned very similarly.

A second parallel between Mesoamerica and the Near East may support the position that the latter area could have been a cultural source for the former in some aspects of armament. The obsidian-edged sword that was called *macuahuitl* by the



Versions of the scimitar-like double-dagger: (a) Syria, the haladie (each blade is 8 or 9 inches long); (b) from Stela 11 at Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, dated to the first century B.C.; (c) Loltún Cave, second century B.C.

Aztecs was labeled *hadzab* among the Maya of Yucatan in Spanish colonial days. The Maya word signifies "that with which one strikes a blow."[2] In Hebrew *ḥṣḇ* means "to hew," as in chopping, although in certain passages in the Hebrew scripture the meaning is "to cut."[3] The phonetic similarity of these two terms seems interesting at least.

This is not the only parallel between Maya and Hebrew terminology.[4] In fact many cultural complexes are shared by the Near East and Mesoamerica that lead to the possibility of some type of historical link between them.[5]

Given these parallels, it seems appropriate to search carefully in the vocabulary related to arms and warfare of the two areas to look for other specific parallels that would shed further light on the nature of the relationship between them. □

or carried. Hamblin and Merrill note that a mural from Chichen Itza (dated long after Book of Mormon times) shows a Toltec-era soldier carrying a bag or basket holding several macuahuitls on his back.[27] Some Aztec warriors carried a kind of rack on their backs to which they could fasten their weapon when not in use.[28] The Toltecs were reported to have borne "swords . . . fastened [on] with belts."[29] So while Nephite warriors might have had sheaths, they could also have "drawn" their swords from a bag, a basket, or a belt fastening.

The expression *drawn* might also have been a rhetorical device meaning something like "prepared to give battle." Early Spanish chroniclers use the term in that metaphorical way when describing actions by native lords using macuahuitls that were not carried in a sheath: "And he flattered himself, that his sword being once drawn [i.e., the decision being made to go to war], he might have a chance to reach the crown."[30] "None of the caciques [native rulers] dared to draw a sword against them."[31]

How sharp were their swords? Some Book of Mormon references to swords suggest that the blades of these weapons could be very sharp, as when Ammon severs the limbs of his enemies at the waters of Sebus, or when a Nephite soldier cuts off Zerahemnah's scalp. Pohl observes, "The brutal nature of this weapon made combat bloody and dismemberment common."[32] Spaniards who faced native Mesoamerican swords in battle were deeply impressed by their deadly cutting power and razorlike sharpness. Here are a few of their statements:

- These swords cut naked men as if they were steel.[33]
- They slashed at his mare, cutting her head at the neck so that it only hung by the skin.
- They killed the mare with a single sword stroke.
- There were shields large and small, and a sort of broadsword, and two-handed swords set with flint blades that cut much better than our swords.[34]

THESE SWORDS CUT NAKED MEN AS IF THEY WERE STEEL.

If Ammon's sword were a macuahuitl, he could easily have cut off the limbs of the livestock "rustlers" that he fought. But even a sharpened sword of hardwood might have done the job as well.

Were their swords pointed? At Alma 44:12–13, Mormon describes the unsuccessful attempt by the leader of a Lamanite army, Zerahemnah, to kill the Nephite chief, Moroni. In the skirmish, a Nephite soldier wounded Zerahemnah by smiting off part of his scalp. The warrior then "laid" the scalp on the "point" of his sword, apparently without piercing it. As Hamblin and Merrill note, we cannot tell from this statement whether the "point" was dangerously sharp or not. Another passage implies that a group of Lamanite prisoners who were attempting to escape may have been impaled on pointed swords held by their guards: "And it came to pass that because of their rebellion we did cause that our swords should come upon them. And it came to pass that they did in a body run upon our swords,

in the which, the greater number of them were slain" (Alma 57:33). Yet the phrasing could also signify that the Nephite guards actively swung their weapons as the desperate men "did . . . run upon" their swords. The language does not allow us to be sure whether the swords were pointed or not.

In fact, some pre-Columbian swords were pointed, as several Mesoamerican codices (native documents) clearly show. The Mendoza Codex, for example, shows Aztec and neighboring Tlaxcalan warriors with wood-bladed swords that are pointed.[35] One of the most impressive battle scenes portrayed in Maya art can be found at Bonampak. On the west wall of Room 2, "a large leaf-shaped blade with a short handle is brandished by a warrior."[36] His weapon is pointed. As already noted, the Spaniards reported that some Mesoamerican stone-bladed swords bore obsidian points. The carved portrait of the warrior at Loltún Cave mentioned above, which dates to the Nephite period, pictures a pointed macuahuitl, similar to a Postclassic example shown by Hassig.[37]

"*The hilt of his sword.*" According to the Book of Mormon, Zerahemnah's sword "broke by the hilt" when his attack on chief captain Moroni was thwarted. According to one of the Spanish conquistadors, the Aztec "broadswords" had "their hilts . . . not quite so long" as those of Spanish swords and "three fingers wide."[38] The swords of Montezuma were described as having "most curious and costly handles,"[39] that is hilts. Hassig notes, "Some swords had thongs through which the user could put his hand to secure the weapon in battle" as he grasped the hilt.[40] The codices frequently show the hilt of the macuahuitl with a knob at the end, which would obviously help keep the heavy weapon from slipping out of the user's hand during combat.[41]

Cimeters in the Book of Mormon

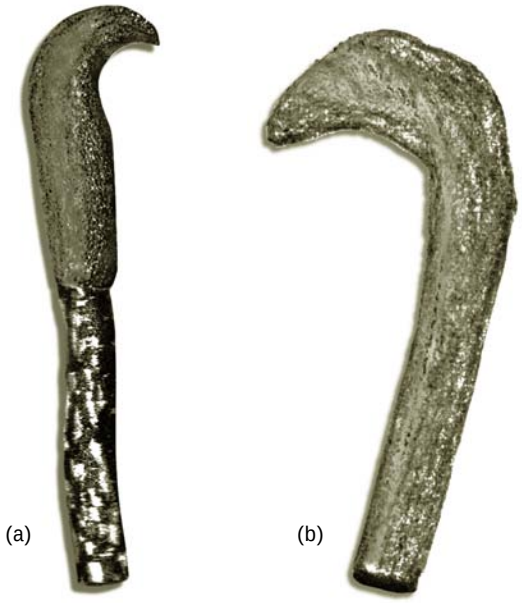
Cimeter is one of a number of spellings used in nineteenth-century America for the word that has become standardized in more recent English as *scimitar*. The dictionary defines scimitar as, "1: a saber having a curved blade with the edge on the convex side. . . . 2: something resembling a scimitar (as in sharpness or shape), *esp:* a long-handled billhook."[42] The primary distinction between a scimitar and a sword is that the former has a curved blade.

In the Book of Mormon weapons labeled *cimeters* are first mentioned during the days of Enos, between about 544 and 421 B.C. Speaking of his people's Lamanite enemies, Enos says, "And their skill was in the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax" (Enos 1:20). While the Nephites are said to have swords during this period (see 2 Nephi 5:14; Omni 1:2, 10), the cimeter is mentioned as only a Lamanite armament. The first Nephites who were reported to be using cimeters were the Zeniffites, who left Zarahemla to reoccupy their ancestral homeland in the land of Nephi amidst the Lamanites (Mosiah 9:16). After the Zeniffites under their third king, Limhi, fled the land of Nephi and settled in Zarahemla, cimeters came into general use by the Nephites during the first century B.C. (see Alma 2:12; 43:18, 20, 37; 44:8; 60:2; Helaman 1:14). It seems obvious that this was a weapon borrowed by the Nephites from the Lamanites through the Zeniffites, as intermediaries. (Conversely, the Lamanites are not said to have used "swords" until their contact with the Zeniffites; see Mosiah 10:8. A cultural interchange in weapon concepts between that group and their Lamanite overlords and foes is logical.)

Mesoamerican Scimitar-Like Weapons

A number of candidate forms are known that plausibly fit the Book of Mormon category *cimeter.* One category consists of simple agricultural or hunting devices that could also have served in battle. Others were more obviously weapons from the outset.

Wood implements. Today's steel-bladed machete is the functional equivalent of a certain agricultural tool from pre-Columbian times.[43] Hayden has suggested that in



A modern iron machete tool, (a), is very similar to a pre-Columbian wooden implement (b) preserved in the waters of the cenote at Chichen Itza.

highland Guatemala, "A sharp-bladed, heavy piece of hardwood may have been employed [anciently] for cutting down or ringing scrub and secondary growth, which is today cleared with a machete. People in that region before World War II, when metal implements were scarce and expensive, used tools called *palo machetes* ("wooden machetes") to clear scrub growth from fields. These were made of hardwoods like *madron*.[44] Clemency C. Coggins, a specialist in the Maya civilization, believes the modern machete "to be a direct descendant of the wooden sickle-like tools found [preserved] in the Cenote" or well at Chichen Itza.[45] Hayden observes that "such a tool might also serve for defense against predators, snakes, and strangers while in the field"; consequently, "the agricultural tool and the weapon may have been one item."[46]

the Lamanites were without armor at this time, even such relatively crude weapons could have been effective.

A curved wood weapon with inset stone blades. While the Book of Mormon cimeter may have been a curved wooden blade, the Nephite and Lamanite use of armor, starting in the battles of the first century B.C., could have brought about a need for more effective blades. In a recent study of Mesoamerican warfare, Hassig describes a curved, clublike weapon that he labels a "short-sword."[47] He knows of their presence only from the post-Classic codices (after A.D. 1,000).[48] This device consisted of a curved piece of hardwood approximately 18 inches long with obsidian blades inset into its cutting end. Hassig credits this slashing weapon with a number of characteristics that clubs, for example, could not provide.[49]

This curved scimitar-like short-sword, inset with sharp obsidian fragments, is found in the Mexican Codex Nuttall (Plate 76).

Warriors shown at Teotihuacan (Atetelco murals) also wield short-swords.

Sometime around 200 B.C., Zeniff recorded that his people were attacked by the Lamanites while they were "feeding their flocks, and tilling their lands" (Mosiah 9:14). When the survivors fled to the king, he had to arm them quickly. Thus "I did arm them with bows, and with arrows, with swords, and with cimeters, and with clubs, and with slings, and with all manner of weapons which we could invent" (Mosiah 9:16). Nothing is said of what materials were used to make these arms, but given the emergency situation it is plausible that they used or based them upon tools that they already employed for everyday purposes, such as wooden implements for clearing vegetation and slings and the bow and arrow for hunting. Since

Such a weapon may have survived right up to the Spanish conquest in highland Guatemala. One Spanish account of a native tradition relates that "the weapons with which it is said they fought were bows and arrows and certain cutlasses that they say were made of flint."[50] The curved form of the end of the "short-sword" could justify the term *cutlasses.*

Despite Hassig's belief in the late invention of this weapon in Mesoamerican history, evidence from earlier Mesoamerican art shows that it was known far earlier than he realized. A stela from Comitan, Chiapas, from before A.D. 1,000, portrays a curved object like this weapon, while something similar is depicted on a monument at Chichen

Itza, dated, according to its inscription, to A.D. 874.[51] Moreover, murals from Teotihuacan as early as A.D. 450 display curved-bladed knives that look very similar to short-swords.[52] Hassig grants that these "were doubtless used in combat as auxiliary weapons. . . . All combatants [among the Teotihuacanos] may have carried them."[53] By their curved shape they too could be called cimeters.

Even back in the era of the Book of Mormon, a weapon was pictured that is similar to the short sword. Hayden notes that a "hooked implement" depicted on Stelas 3 and 4 at Izapa (second century B.C.) and on Stela 2 at La Venta (no later than the sixth century B.C.) "bears a remarkable resemblance to the hooked machete used by some groups today." To him "it seems most probable that the item was being used as a weapon," which must have been made of wood since no archaeological remains of this form have been recovered.[54] Another early Guatemalan site, now known as Abaj Takalik, contains carved stone monuments somewhat similar to the sculptural styles at Izapa and La Venta and seemingly dated to the centuries before 400 B.C. One of these pictures a man who grasps a weapon with a curved blade. It is impossible to tell from these sculptured images whether the blades were of wood alone or had an inset obsidian edge.

Other curved weapons. The possibility has been suggested that a strange double-curved weapon held in the left hand of the warrior figure on the Loltún cave relief (see p. 34) might be considered a scimitar/cimeter.[55] Its two blades curve in opposite directions from the ends of a central handle. Grube and Schele consider the object to be a weapon, and it looks something like a special version of the short-sword discussed above. We recall that the date for the figure at Loltún falls within the Book of Mormon period. Moreover, the Izapan art style in which the figure is carved originated in Pacific coastal Guatemala or southern Mexico. That region includes the territory thought by most Latter-day Saint researchers to have been the Nephite and Lamanite heartland. Thus the weapon shown at Loltún has a good chance of being one of the arms that Lamanites and Nephites were using during the central segment of Book of Mormon history. In fact, at Kaminaljuyu, the great ruined city in the valley of Guatemala, which many consider to have been the city of Nephi (or Lehi-Nephi), Stela 11 shows a warrior figure holding a curved object similar to that on the Loltún portrait. It may be even earlier than the one at Loltún, dating to the early Miraflores period (250 to 100 B.C.). Some Mesoamerican experts consider that the curved object on Stela 11 was the equivalent of the double-bladed weapon at Loltún.[56] (For an Old World parallel, see the sidebar on pp. 39–40.)

Summary

One striking fact emerges when we compare statements in the Book of Mormon text to studies of weapons in pre-Columbian cultures in Mesoamerica: Several kinds of swords and cimeters were in ancient use that are plausible candidates for the objects the Nephite account describes.

The most obvious "sword" is the macuahuitl, the straight-edged wooden instrument lined with sharp stone fragments. It functioned like an Old World sword, and the Spaniards called it a sword without hesitation.

Another weapon that fits the category *sword* consisted of straight implements of hardwood that had been given a sharp edge and a point and then hardened by exposure to heat. These were apparently basic agricultural tools (the equivalent of machetes or sickles) converted for use in combat. Hints are also found in the Mesoamerican sources of additional sword-like forms, such as a long knife of flint.

The cimeter of the Book of Mormon is known today as a scimitar—a curved blade with the outer side sharpened. The bill-hook, "short-sword," and double-dagger are other Mesoamerican weapons that fit with the concept of scimitar.

All the weapons cited in the Book of Mormon text have parallels among Mesoamerican armaments. By making this kind of comparison—of the scriptural text with external sources about the ancient American setting—we clarify the scriptural text and arrive at a more realistic understanding of what its people were actually doing in the stories we read in Mormon's account. □

ENDNOTES

Swords and "Cimeters" in the Book of Mormon
Matthew Roper

1. According to Robert F. Smith; see John L. Sorenson, "Metals and Metallurgy Relating to the Book of Mormon Text" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 83.
2. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*, tr. J. M. Cohen (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 142–43.
3. Matthew Roper, "Eyewitness Descriptions of Mesoamerican Swords," *JBMS* 5/1 (1996): 150–58. See, for example, Francisco Lopez de Gomara, *Cortes: The Life of the Conqueror by His Secretary Francisco Lopez de Gomara*, tr. Lesley B. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 152; Antonio de Solis, *The History of the Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards*, tr. Thomas Townsend, 3 vols. (London: n.p., 1724); ibid. (Book IV, ch. 13), 2:202; ibid. (Book IV, ch. 16), 2:221. Ronald Spores notes that the Mixtec warriors had "clubs, *macanas*, . . . long and

short wooden swords, and bows and arrows," Ronald Spores, "The Zapotec and Mixtec at Spanish Contact," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 3:976.

4. Díaz, *Conquest of New Spain*, 228.
5. De Solis, *History of the Conquest* (Book III, ch. 14), 2:77.
6. Thelma D. Sullivan, "The Arms and Insignia of the Mexica," *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* 10 (1972): 155.
7. Chris L. Moser, "Tomb I at Barrio Del Rosario, Huitzo, Oaxaca," *Katunob* 7/1 (1969): 20; see also Kent V. Flannery, "Zapotec Warfare: Archaeological Evidence for the Battles of Huitzo and Guiengola," in *The Cloud People: Divergent Evolution of the Zapotec and Mixtec Civilizations*, ed. Kent. V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus (New York: Academic Press, 1983), 319.
8. Francis Robicsek, "The Weapons of the Ancient Maya," in *Circumpacifica. Band I: Mittel- und Sudamerica. Festschrift für Thomas S. Barthel*, ed. Bruno Illius and Matthias Laubscher (Frankfurt: Lang, 1990), 372.
9. Ross Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 7.
10. Francisco Estrada Belli and Laura J. Kosakowsky, "Survey in Jutiapa, Southeastern Pacific Guatemala, 1997," *Mexicon* 20 (June 1998): 55–59, fig. 4.
11. Tatiana Proskouriakoff, *A Study of Classic Maya Sculpture* (Washington D. C.: Carnegie Institution, 1950), 104.
12. V. Garth Norman, "Izapa Sculpture, Part 2: Text," *Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation* 30 (1976): 309, 317; Nikolai Grube and Linda Schele, "New Observations on the Loltún Relief," *Mexicon* 18/1 (February 1996): 11–14.
13. Philip Drucker, "La Venta, Tabasco: A Study of Olmec Ceramics and Art," *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 153 (1952): 202.
14. "The New Site Museum of San Lorenzo," *Mexicon* 17/6 (December 1995), 104. At a presentation at BYU in 1995, Cyphers Guillen affirmed that this weapon was a macuahuitl.
15. Spores, "The Zapotec and Mixtec," 3:976.
16. M. Wells Jakeman, ed., "The 'Historical Recollections' of Gasper Antonio Chi," *BYU Publications in Archaeology and Early History* 3 (1952): 40; Mercedes de las Garza, *Relaciones Histórico-Geográficas de la Governación de Yucatán* (Mexico: Universidad Nactional Autónoma de México, 1983), 1:270–71. See also Francis A. MacNutt, ed. and tr., *De Orbe Novo: The Eight Decades of Peter Martyr D'Anghera*, 2 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1912), 1:228, 327; 2:15, 21, 51, 182; Martín de Palomar, *Relaciónes Historico-Geograficas de la Governacion de Yucatan*, 2 vols. (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, 1983), 1:271.
17. *Codex Mendoza: Aztec Manuscript*, commentaries by Kurt Ross (Miller Graphics, 1978), 20, 91, 97–98; Ernest Mengin, "Commentaire du Codex Mexicanus nos 23–24 de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris," *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 40 (1952): pls. 57, 60, 71; Eva Hunt, "Irrigation and the Socio-Political Organization of Cuicatec," in *The Prehistory of the Tehuacan Valley: Chronology and Irrigation*, ed. Frederick Johnson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), 4:210, fig. 94. I would like to thank John Sorenson for bringing this example to my attention.
18. Brian Hayden, "Past to Present Uses of Stone Tools in the Maya Highlands," in *Lithic Studies among the Contemporary Highland Maya*, ed. Brian Hayden (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), 170.
19. Robert S. Chamberlain, *The Conquest and Colonization of Yucatan 1517–1550* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 110. Chamberlain is citing Oviedo, *Historia general y natural de las indias, islas y tierra firme del Mar Oceano* (Madrid: n.p., 1851–55), 32–36.
20. Samuel K. Lothrop, *Metals from the Cenote of Sacrifice: Chichen Itza, Yucatan* (Cambridge: Peabody Museum, 1952), 44. Figure 1 shows a metal plate portraying a sacrificial scene. The officiator holds what appears to be a large wooden blade in his left hand that might easily be described as a fighting knife or a short sword.
21. In the Near East, weapons with a surface of "steel" in chemical terms were known hundreds of years before Laban's day. See Nikolaas J. van der Merwe and Donald H. Avery, "Pathways to Steel," *American Scientist* 70 (1972): 146–55; Lenore O. Keene Congdon, "Steel in Antiquity: A Problem in Terminology," in *Studies Presented to George M. A. Hanfmann*, ed. David G. Mitten, John G. Pedley, and Jane A. Scott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 17–27; Tamara S. Wheeler and Robert Maddin, "Metallurgy and Ancient Man," in *The Coming of the Age of Iron*, ed. T. A. Wertime and J. D. Muhly (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 99–126.
22. William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill, "Swords in the Book of Mormon," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 329–51.
23. Janne M. Sjodahl, *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1927), 74–75; compare Robert J. Forbes, *Metallurgy in Antiquity: A Notebook for Archaeologists and Technologists* (Leiden: Brill, 1950), 402.
24. Sorenson, "Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!" *RBBM* 6/1 (1994): 319–26, 331.
25. Hamblin and Merrill, "Swords," 343.
26. Juan de Torquemade, *Monarquia Indiana* (Book 13, chapter 34, in *Fray Juan de Torquemade: Monarquia Indiana*, ed. Miguel Leon Portilla, [Mexico: Editorial Porrua, 1969], 2:489).
27. Prescott H. F. Follett, "War and Weapons of the Maya," *Middle American Research Series Publication* 4 (1932): 388, fig. 20.
28. See John M. D. Pohl, *Aztec, Mixtec and Zapotec Armies* (London: Osprey, 1991), 26, pl. B.
29. "Toltec Warfare," in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Mesoamerica*, ed. Margaret R. Bunson and Stephen M. Bunson (New York: Facts on File, 1996), 262.
30. De Solis, *History of the Conquest* (Book IV, ch. 2), 2:126–27.
31. MacNutt, *De Orbe Novo*, 2:360.
32. Pohl, *Aztec, Mixtec and Zapotec Armies*, 11.
33. Samuel E. Morrison, *Journals and Other Documents on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (New York: Heritage Press, 1963), 327.
34. Díaz, *Conquest of New Spain*, 142–43, 145, 158, 228.
35. Ross, *Codex Mendoza*, 97–98.
36. Karl Ruppert, J. Eric Thompson, and Tatiana Proskouriakoff, "Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico," *Carnegie Institution of Washington Publications* 602 (1955): 62.
37. Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 84, fig. 11.
38. Fuentes, *The Conquistadors*, 169.
39. De Solis (Book III, ch. 14), 2:77.
40. Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 83.
41. Fray Diego Durán, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, tr. Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), pls. 12, 14, 21–25, 27, 31, 35, 39, 40. The Inca also apparently possessed a macana.
42. *Webster's Third International Dictionary*. For an earlier discussion of this topic, see Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Scimitars, Cimeters! We have Scimitars! Do We Need Another Cimeter," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 352–59.
43. Charles Wisdom, *Los Chorti de Guatemala* (Guatemala: Editorial del Ministerio de Educación Pública "José de Piñeda Ibarra," 1961), 206; Angel Palerm, "Agricultural Systems and Food Patterns," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, 6:47; Evon Z. Vogt, *Zinacantan: A Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1969), 42; Brian D. Hayden, "Material Culture in the Mayan Highlands: A Preliminary Study," in *Settlement Pattern Excavations at Kaminaljuyu*, ed. Joseph W. Michaels University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), 222; Clemency C. Coggins, ed., *Artifacts from the Cenote of Sacrifice: Chichen Itza, Yucatan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 322–26.
44. Hayden, "Past to Present Uses of Stone Tools in the Maya Highlands," 167.
45. Coggins, ed., *Artifacts*, esp. 324.
46. Hayden, "Past to Present," 169.
47. Hassig, *War and Society*, 112–13.
48. For example, Furst, Plate III and *The Codex Nuttall: A Picture Manuscript from Ancient Mexico. The Peabody Museum Facsimile*, ed. Zelia Nuttall (New York: Dover, 1975), plates 66, 68, 72, 76.
49. Hassig, *War and Society*, 113.
50. Juan de Estrada and Fernando de Niebla, "Descripción de la provincia de Zapotitlán y Suchitepéquez," *Sociedad de Geografia e Historia de Guatemala, Anales* 28 (1955): 74.
51. Franz Blom and Oliver LaFarge, *Tribes and Temples: A Record of the Expedition to Middle America Conducted by Tulane University of Louisiana in 1925*, 2 vols. (New Orleans: Tulane University of Louisiana, 1926–27), 2, fig. 352; J. Eric S. Thompson, "Some Sculptures from Southeastern Quetzaltenango, Guatemala," *Notes on Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology* 17 (30 March, 1943): 104. The date is given in Linda Schele and David A. Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 392.
52. Laurette Sejourné, *Arquitectura y Pintura en Teotihuacán* (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1966), fig. 173; George Kubler, "The Iconography of the Art of Teotihuacán," *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology* (1967): figs. 11–14; Arthur G. Miller, *The Mural Painting of Teotihuacán* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1973), 85, 116, 162.
53. Hassig, *War and Society*, 47.
54. Hayden, "Past to Present," 167.
55. Hamblin and Merrill, "Swords in the Book of Mormon," 343.
56. Antonio P. Andrews, "El 'Guerrero' de Loltún: Comentario Analítico," *Boletín de la Escuela de Ciencias Antropológicas de la Universidad de Yucatán* 8–9/48–49 (1981): 42; Lee A. Parsons, *The Origins of Maya Art: Monumental Stone Sculpture of Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, and the Southern Pacific Coast* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1986), 78–79.